

Food Safety and You:

THE DANGERS OF RAW PET FOOD DIETS



Feeding dogs or cats raw pet food diets is becoming increasingly popular. This trend is based on the idea that dogs and cats are wild animals and should be fed what other wild animals eat. Ingredients in raw pet food diets may include lamb, chicken, rabbit, beef, duck and so on. Other ingredients may include fruits or vegetables. As natural as raw pet food diets may seem, these diets have not been shown to be healthier for pets. In addition, they can pose significant risks to humans.

Dangers to Humans

The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) tested more than 1,000 samples of pet food and found 23 percent of the samples tested positive for Salmonella and Listeria bacteria versus just 0.1% for cooked pet food (dry and semi-moist). Both Salmonella and Listeria, as well as other bacteria found in raw pet food, can cause life threatening illnesses in humans. Older adults, pregnant women, children and anyone with a weakened immune system are especially at risk.

Pet owners can be exposed to pathogens in raw pet food in a variety of ways. Some of these include:

- Handling raw pet food without washing hands,
- Cross contamination from poor handling practices such as:
 - Thawing frozen food in a sink or on a counter top,
 - Using the same cutting board that is used for preparing fresh foods, and
 - Placing raw pet food in a refrigerator together with other foods.
- Contact with pets eating raw food diets
 - Dogs and cats can harbor and shed Salmonella or Listeria without showing any signs of having the disease.

Dangers to Pets

Pathogens found in raw pet food diets also can make pets sick. Several public health and professional veterinary groups, including: the American Veterinary Medical Association, American College of Veterinary Nutritionists, American Animal Hospital Association, Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, discourage the feeding of raw meat to pets.

Properly processed pet food is heated in such a way as to retain the nutritional value while inactivating disease-causing pathogens.

Raw food advocates claim that raw diets are more closely related to the diets that the ancestors of dogs and cats ate. These advocates also claim there are associated health benefits such as easier digestibility, weight management, healthier skin and coat conditions, less allergies, improved health and immunity overall. However, the ancestor proclamation does not address the evolutionary, biological and dietary changes that are associated with domestication of our modern-day pets. Nor are any of these health claims supported by science-based research. Most raw pet food diets are not properly formulated for all life stages of pets. They frequently contain excessive amounts of phosphorus, which can be damaging to the kidneys and lead to bladder stones. These diets also are typically low in necessary vitamins and other nutrients.

Avoiding the Dangers of Raw Pet Food Diets

The best way to reduce the risks associated with raw pet food diets is to avoid feeding pets raw food. Instead, feed pets commercially-prepared pet foods. If a veterinarian recommends feeding a pet a home-prepared diet, the food should be cooked. Raw meats for pets should be handled using the same guidelines as those for human food, which are:

- Wash hands with warm soapy water for at least 20 seconds before and after handling raw pet food.
- Keep raw pet food frozen until ready to use.





- Thaw raw pet food in the refrigerator or microwave, separated from human food.
 - A secondary container should be used to prevent raw meat or poultry juice contact with other food or inner surface of the refrigerator or microwave.
 - Do not thaw raw pet food on the counter top or in the sink.
- Regularly clean refrigerators, microwaves and kitchen counter tops and clean immediately when there is leaking juice from raw meat or poultry.
- Immediately clean and sanitize cutting boards, knives, utensils, containers or anything that encounters raw pet food.
- Cover and refrigerate leftovers immediately.
- Avoid kissing or licking from pets after they consume raw food.
- Regularly clean and sanitize pet living areas regularly.
- Avoid letting children, elderly, pregnant women or immune-compromised people handle raw pet food.

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